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THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE:

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE

CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF NORWICH,

On THURSDAY, the 29th of November,



THE DAY OF THE

GENERAL THANKSGIVING.

BY T. F. MIDDLETON, A. M.

RECTOR OF TANSOR, IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE.

Norwich:

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1798.





Norwich.

*At a Court of Mayoralty, held the 1st of
December, 1798,*

*Resolved—That the Thanks of this Court
be presented to the Reverend T. F. Middleton
for the Sermon preached by him at the Cathe-
dral on Thursday the 29th of November last,
being Thanksgiving Day. And in confor-
mity to the unanimous wish of the Mayor,
Sheriffs and Aldermen then present, he is
requested to print the same.*

By the Court,

DE HAGUE.

*T*Ō *T*HE *R*IGHT *W*ORSHIPFUL
JOHN BROWNE, ESQ. MAYOR,
*T*he *S*heriffs,
*A*ND *T*HE *A*LDERMEN,

OF THE
CITY OF NORWICH,

The following Sermon

IS MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED,
BY THEIR VERY OBEDIENT AND HUMBLE SERVANT,

THE AUTHOR.

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S E R M O N.

DEUT. Chap. xxx. v. 19, 20.

"I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, a blessing and a curse: therefore chuse life; that both thou and thy seed may live: that thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land, which the Lord sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

IN the former part of these words, the Lawgiver proclaims an awful truth, which had a reference to the happiness, not only of his own immediate followers, but of the whole human race. It is true both of men and nations, that they are, in a considerable degree, the authors of their own fortunes. Before individuals at their entrance into the world,

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and before communities in their political career are set Life and Death, a Blessing and a Curse. To both of them prudence and virtue afford a reasonable hope of prosperity; and both of them, by folly and depravity, are menaced with ultimate ruin:

It is certain, nevertheless, that not only the natural, but the moral world, is subject to the agency of Disturbing Causes. It is these, which in the former sometimes render fallacious our nicest computations, and in the latter disappoint our fairest hopes. Our own good conduct is not always sufficient to ensure our success. In society, men are connected with each other by common interests and endless dependencies. The misconduct, or even the misfortunes of one man, may be pregnant with consequences fatal to many: and we can never affirm, that we are secure in the possession of any temporal good, merely because we have used every precaution, which probity and prudence suggest.—If such be the condition of individuals, still more is it that of communities. Exposed to all the consequences

consequences, with which private happiness is threatened, they have not, and they cannot have, the same power of restraining the violence and injustice of each other, which is afforded the individual by the laws. It is essential to their independence, and even to their existence, that they should remain insubordinate among themselves, no less than that their internal subordination should be complete. Societies, therefore, obnoxious to the caprice of their ambitious neighbours, have no tribunal, to which they can appeal; and neither the wisdom nor the moderation of their rulers may be able to rescue them from War, ever calamitous in its progress and doubtful in its issue.

This remark has been strongly exemplified in the history of the last few years. An event has taken place, which has involved the interests, and disturbed the tranquillity, of this quarter of the globe. It has given birth to a Power, of which Ambition has been the master-passion, and Destruction the vital principle. The mild philosophic mien, which at first it endeavoured to preserve, was soon

ruffled by its innate ferocity: and hypocrisy has at length vanished from the catalogue of its vices. As its object is unexampled in magnitude, so have the measures adopted to ensure its attainment been novel and formidable. Force, which had hitherto executed the decrees of usurpation and tyranny, has been but an inferior engine of its malignity. It has devised a System of Policy, calculated to lull into indifference, or to engage in active friendship, the wretch, whom it has doomed to destruction.

It cannot be denied, that the authors of this policy were, in the language of the Gospel, "wise in their generation." It cannot be doubted, that they possessed an extensive acquaintance with mankind, at least with the most corrupt of the species, and a profound insight into the human heart, under the dominion of its worst propensities. With acuteness to avail themselves of every advantage, they discovered that the happiness and independence of nations were accessible by a path untrod before. Superstition, they well knew, had repeatedly been made the instrument of overbearing domination;
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and men had been often animated to exertion by the generous fervors of mistaken piety: but never had their energies been awakened by an appeal to their criminal passions, or by an attempt to obliterate their fixed conceptions of good and evil. For this age was it reserved to rise to that tremendous sublimity of wickedness, by which mankind were to be persuaded to divest themselves of religious obligation, to level the mounds of morality, to stifle the admonitions of conscience, and to deride the terrors of a future retribution. It is true, indeed, that Atheism and Infidelity are by no means of modern growth. A few solitary speculatists have at every period been disposed to scepticism; but never till of late has it been recognized by a legislature, or directed to a political end. But History delights in parallels and contrasts. The valour and enthusiasm of the *middle* ages were turned against the Infidels of Palestine: *we* have witnessed an Infidel crusade against the liberties and religion of Europe.

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To the attentive observers of mankind it was evident, that this singular enterprize would, for a time at least, be crowned with success. It is the weakness of our nature, that they, who cannot be intimidated by threats, may yet be soothed by flattery; and that delusion is often practicable and effectual, where force would be impotent and fruitless. Herein, then, lay the mystery of this political iniquity. It addressed itself to those of every nation, whose characters and habits entitled them to be considered as natural allies, or who could by sophistry be brought to a belief, that their interests were connected with its own. The proselytes, as might be expected, were not few. The uninformed were overcome by the boldness of opinions, whose solidity they could not examine, and whose pretensions to novelty they could not overthrow. The ardour of the young kindled at the prospect of glory and promotion. To blasted ambition was again offered a theatre for the display of its talents. The attention of Envy was directed to the affluence and the honours of the rich. The poor felt a generous gratitude to the benevolence, which affected
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to sympathize with their sorrows. The profligate and abandoned, of whatever class, could require no sollicitation: and the enchanting sounds of Freedom and Philosophy had powers of seduction, which almost shook the firmness and integrity of the wise and good. Thus was victory ensured to the armies of a Government, which has overwhelmed with ruin a considerable portion of the Christian world. Whole nations at this hour groan beneath its yoke. The progress of its adherents has every where been marked by rapine, lust, and cruelty; and it has shewn itself the most destructive minister of vengeance, by whom the Almighty ever scourged a guilty world.

But not in the spirit of rancour and revenge do we descant on the crimes of our Enemy. The duty, which we are this day called upon to discharge, requires that we should well examine the danger, with which we have been threatened; that we should ascertain its magnitude by its mode of operation; and that we should estimate the value of our deliverance, by a comparison of our own
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situation with that of others. Ingratitude, odious as it is deservedly accounted, less often proceeds from stupid insensibility or reluctant acknowledgement, than from culpable inattention. The ordinary blessings of Providence pass almost unheeded. They are enjoyed by multitudes in common with ourselves; and they follow each other in continual succession, till the cause is scarcely noticed in the frequency of the effect. It is thus that ingratitude becomes a habit: and its influence sometimes chills the heart, amid the most signal interpositions of Omnipotence. Among these it is, that we ought to number the recent preservation of this Island. Placed by Nature at the very foot of the Volcano, we have been enabled to brave its fury; and our plains still flourish, in their wonted exuberance, unhurt by its eruption. There was, indeed, a time, and still it is present to the recollection of us all, when our political horizon was less bright; when clouds and darkness hovered around us; and the storm, which had burst upon other lands, seemed to bend its course to these shores. The temporary delusion, which has infatuated mankind, had then attained

attained its crisis. It appeared, as if the fountains of opinion had been poisoned, and the bane had vitiated every part of the moral system. Justice began to falter in her decisions; Fortitude to shrink from the impending conflict; and Piety to droop under the pressure of dismay. But her fears were vain! The Almighty has enabled us to endure the shock; and He, who is faithful, hath not forsaken us in the hour of our distress.

To ascribe an independent efficacy to the agency of Second Causes, is as little consistent with genuine Philosophy, as it is with the very idea of Religion. Piety and Wisdom concur in regarding them but as so many modes of Providence, as means destined to accomplish the purposes of Almighty Power. We deny not, that they have been ordained most remarkably to co-operate to our national security. Prudence and tempered firmness have guided the counsels of our Sovereign. The great body of the People have unequivocally testified their attachment to the Constitution. Legions of our brave Citizens are associated in its defence. Our Army
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has spurned at the sophistry which was meant to seduce it from its allegiance. The Militia has extended the limits of its stipulated services: and our Navy, long since the admiration of the World, has, by the daring genius of its Commanders, and the heroism of the Seamen, eclipsed the ancient splendour of its own illustrious name. In speaking of its *late* achievements, it is difficult to repress the rising vanity of Patriotism, it is difficult to restrain the intemperance of triumph. By them has confidence already been inspired into the Powers of Europe; and already have Persecution and Intolerance assumed a feebler tone. To such manifestations of the Divine Favor must our internal security at this hour be attributed. Hence is it, that our Laws are still made and executed without foreign intervention; that the wealth of our Merchants has been exempted from requisitions; that the labours of the husbandman have been preserved from devastation; that domestic happiness has remained un sullied by the licentiousness of the Invader; and that the temples of our Religion have not yet been profaned by mockery and folly:—in a word,

word, that we are insulated in our political, as in our geographical situation.

If such, then, have been the mercies vouchsafed to us by the Almighty, we can have no difficulty in ascertaining the nature of the Blessing, which is set before these Kingdoms. We have been maintained, contrary to human probability, in the possession of whatever is most dear to us, as Christians and as men; and, we trust, we are not guilty of impious presumption, if we conclude, from all we know and feel, that we are a favored People. Yet let not a consciousness of our singular felicity lead us into error. While we yet stand, we should take heed lest we fall. The Israelites had not less cause than ourselves to rely on the Almighty protection. A Blessing was set before them: and yet they chose the Curse; and they no longer dwell in the land, which the Lord swore unto their fathers. To imagine, that we are ever authorized to relax our vigilance, is alike to misconceive the moral Government of God, and the primary constitution of our nature. It deserves to be remembered, that extra-

ordinary aid, as it is feldom granted us, fhould in wifdom and humility never be expected: that the ordinary courfe of Providence is to act by fecond caufes: that thefe caufes in his moral adminiftration are the voluntary actions of Mankind: that Virtue and Happinefs are never fo fecure, but that corrupt paffions may effect their fall: that the abufe of our talents, and the neglect of our duty, generally conftitute our Curfe; and that while the Almighty preserves to us the fruits of our exertion, and fhields us againft the natural effects of thofe Difturbing Caufes, in the operation of which our own misconduct has had no fhare, fo long are we in the actual enjoyment of the only Bleffing, for which reafon and Revelation permit us to hope. Religion, indeed, confiders the Divine Favor as the greateft good: but to regard it as appropriated and unalienable, or as fuperseding the neceffity of human efforts, is the character of genuine Superftition.

It will become us, therefore, to employ the moment of our fuccefs as a feafon of reflection; and we fhould

should anxiously enquire into the nature of the Curse, to which our prosperity is obnoxious: in other words—What are the habits and dispositions, which by their tendency might conduce to our ruin?

Of these, no one would be more destructive than a Decline of Public Spirit. This evil, wherever it generally prevails, is a sure and alarming prognostic. It is, indeed, in the life of Nations, what Old Age is in that of Man. The same languor, indifference, and imbecility, are the characteristics of them both: in both of them the feelings are not unfrequently absorbed by the same sordid passion: and they both lead inevitably, by an easy descent, to the termination of existence. Far distant, we trust, is our own nation from this awful crisis: it displays the vigour and the warmth of youth: and its general aspect is that of health and longevity. And yet, were we to judge from a few partial instances, we might augur less favorably of its condition. When men of characters otherwise irreproachable will consent by artifice to evade the debt, which they have contracted with society,
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it cannot be dissembled, that the appearance is inauspicious. It gives us reason to apprehend, that the period *may* arrive, when the practice shall be common and unregarded; when private dishonesty shall be held more infamous than public frauds; when the burthens of the State can no longer be borne from their unequal distribution; and when Avarice shall not hesitate to call Perjury to its aid. Of such a people it might safely be pronounced, that their hour was come.

A second evil, which might terminate in our destruction, would be a general Spirit of wild speculation and political experiment. The present, it is true, is not a period, when this evil is at its height. The torrent, which threatened to inundate the social world, is beginning to subside, and to return to its proper channel. The mischiefs it has already occasioned, might, indeed, teach mankind to guard against its rage, and to employ the aid of past experience in checking its future deviations. And yet there is amongst us a class of men, with whom experience passes for nothing.

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With them, History is not "Philosophy teaching by example;" their philosophy disclaims example, and teaches by hypothesis. They invariably reason, as if there were every thing to create, and nothing to destroy. It is easy, without doubt, to imagine a situation, in which their conduct would not be unnatural. A party of savages* meeting in a desert, and impelled by their common wants to devise some mode of society, might fairly be presumed to enter on the debate without preference or prepossession. But where is the parallel? Surely not in a country, where society has long been established, improved and refined; where rights have long since been recognized, have been confirmed, and are still protected; where property has effaced every vestige of primæval neutrality; and where the ties of interest are so nicely interwoven and so widely extended, that no institution

* It is not here meant to be conceded, that mankind ever actually existed in what is called the State of Nature, a state antecedent to all Government whatever. There are many objections to such an opinion: among others, the subsequent origin of Government; which is considered by the Bishop of Rochester, as "an unphilosophical creation of something out of nothing." It is, however, in such a state only, that we should expect that absolute political apathy, which we sometimes witness.

can be touched, but that thousands must perish in its ruins.

But to these and other obvious truths is opposed an unceasing clamour against prejudice. This proceeding is formidable; as it is addressed to a passion, which every man feels in some degree, and which is always his most sensitive part. Prejudice implies weakness or folly; a disgraceful imputation, from which vanity revolts. But what is the specific meaning of the term in question? The savage (to revert to the same supposition) who should come to the enquiry already determined in favor of some particular species of polity, of which he had barely heard the name, without knowing any thing whatever of its merits, would exhibit an unexceptionable instance of prejudice. And the case must be strictly limited by these conditions: for if he possessed a knowledge of its excellence, tho' that knowledge were but inconsiderable, and obtained only from credible report, much more if it were possible, by the nature of the case, to be the result of actual experience, his conduct would

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no longer deserve the stigma of Prejudice, but would be an act of the soundest Reason. Neither are *we* prejudiced, if we avow an attachment to those National Establishments, under which we have for centuries flourished, and may flourish for centuries to come. It is strictly rational to prefer security to danger, certainty to possibility, and possession to hope. It is, however, incalculable what mischief has been effected by unmeaning generalities and insidious ambiguities in terms. In all ages they have been employed by the wicked against the weak, and of late against the good sense of this Country with a success, which will justify caution.

Finally, and above all, let us beware of Apostacy from that Being, who no less in a political than in a scriptural sense, is our life and the length of our days. The distance between the decay of Religion and the decline of Empires is never great: a general profligacy of manners is the only intermediate step. That morals, indeed, are indispensibly requisite to the existence of States, is never questioned. Even the Legislators of Antiquity, who

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cannot be suspected of excessive refinement, assent to the position. But whether a similar relation subsist between Morals and Religion, is occasionally a subject of dispute. There are those, who would seduce us from our Faith, on the plea, that we need not its aid. They insinuate, that neither was a Revelation necessary towards establishing a rule of conduct, nor an appeal to religious hopes and fears towards enforcing its observance. Their known dogma, that "Virtue is nothing more than Self-interest well understood," deserves to be considered.

Whatever professes to render simple, that which was hitherto thought complex and abstruse, will always be favourably received, and often without sufficient examination of its tendency. Of this kind is the principle now before us. Strictly true in itself, it is calculated to mislead, because the abuse of it is far more easy and obvious than the use. To apply it, indeed, as it ought to be applied, is hardly the intent of those, who refer to it: for so understood, it is nothing else than a recognition of the design and utility of the Christian dispensation. Christianity is an appeal to the real and most important

portant interests of Mankind: and, undoubtedly, he who obeys its precepts, is not, either in a spiritual or a temporal view, chargeable with the neglect of his own well-being. But since this maxim is most frequently resorted to by those, whose object is any thing, rather than to recommend the Christian Faith, it must evidently be otherwise interpreted: and, indeed, it is liable to a very different construction. With an air of accuracy, it requires that Interest should be "well understood:" and yet the great question, whether he best understands his interest, who regards immediate or distant good, is passed over in cautious silence. It intimates, however, that the nature of Virtue is very easily ascertained, being not less so, than that of Self-interest; of which few persons, if any, believe themselves ignorant. It will be concluded, therefore, that Virtue is only the result of that plain good sense, which is daily exerted in the business of life: and hence every man's judgment, whatever it may be, will become the rule of conduct, by which he is to be directed in his intercourse with Society. But the rule of life, whencesoever derived, should pos-

fess the following recommendations. It should be plain, because it is intended more especially for the use of those, who are least qualified for abstract enquiry. It should be impartial, so as not to favor corrupt propensities; for then it would fail, where it most was wanted. It should also be universal: for else Mankind would have no common standard, to which they could have recourse, and life would be embroiled in endless disputation. Lastly, it should be sanctioned by the highest authority; because nothing short of that authority has any claim to regard, in a question of the highest importance. But the rule of life meant to be established by referring every man to his private judgment, would be defective in each of these particulars. It would not be plain, because it would lead him through a labyrinth of metaphysical deductions, before it could be found, even if he should find it at last. It would not be impartial; because impartiality is rarely attainable, where passion interferes. It would not be universal; on the contrary, of several enquirers scarcely two would arrive at the same conclusion. And it would by no means be authoritative

ritative, possessing no higher sanction, than that of the weakness and fallibility of Man. Let Revelation be tried by the same criteria:—it is impossible not to anticipate the contrast.

The definition, however, was obliged to admit, that Self-interest is not always “well understood:” a concession, of which the consequences are extremely important to the cause of Christianity. For whence does this misunderstanding arise? Immediate interest is in general perfectly well understood; and it cannot be urged, that we are indifferent to its call. It appears, then, that to ascertain immediate advantage, is not the whole, which is required: and remote consequences must be taken into the account, if we wish to attain to Virtue. Religion asks no more. For on what conviction, on what security will men be persuaded to endure the penance of self-denial, to resist the sollicitations of desire, to relinquish opportunities, which may never return, of possessing whatever excites the wish of Avarice or Ambition? On any other belief, than that a future state awaits us, attended
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with the consequences recorded in the Gospel, forbearance would be weakness, and abstinence were folly: "to-morrow we die."

For this reason, Philosophy abstracted from Religion, is of little or no use in the regulation of human conduct. Men do not act upon half-principles. The Will must be absolutely determined: the bias must be decisive. But such a bias can never be communicated except through the medium of our hopes and fears. Reason is but one of the avenues to the heart; and that, perhaps, the longest, the narrowest, and most difficult of approach: and even he, who has gained admittance by this avenue, must still work on our hopes and fears, if he would influence the Will. He would otherwise betray the cause, for which he is an advocate, by using feeble persuasives, when stronger are within his power: a species of treachery the more fatal to the interests of Virtue, inasmuch as it is never practised by the advocates of Vice.

But after all, what is the real and ultimate design of those, who would establish a rule of life unconnected

needed with Christianity? They are not so absurd as to contend, that Morals would be *advanced* by being rendered independent of the functions of Religion: they profess only to expect, that Morality would be practised, just as it is at present. But is this an object likely to be pursued with so much warmth? For of all men, Infidels are the most zealous: is this the source of so much ardour and so much industry? It cannot be: Reason forbids it: every effect has its cause; every action has its motive: and their's is left to our conjecture. The task, perhaps, is not arduous. It was justly remarked in another Country, "If you wish to accomplish a Revolution, you must begin by the overthrow of the Catholic Faith."*

To conclude, then, let us advert to the condition, in which Providence has been pleased to place the People of this Island. A Blessing is set before us; and we feel its benign effects. A Curse likewise hangs over us; though the period of its fall, we

"Si vous voulez une Révolution, il faut DECATHOLISER la France." MIRABEAU.
It can hardly be contended, that this was meant only against the errors of Popery: Mirabeau has no pretension to be classed with Luther or Calvin.

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trust, is far remote. Even now does the Sovereign
 Disposer of Events seem graciously to withdraw
 from us its menacing form. Yet let us not forget
 that Grace acts not by compulsion; but that the
 Will is free: and that if by selfishness, folly, or im-
 piety, we once renounce the Blessing, it may be vain
 to deprecate the Curse.



